

At Work and Play

across. Otherwise, the construction of the Comanche wheel was exactly like that illustrated by Lowie.²⁶ It consisted of willow rim with rawhide spokes radiating from a rawhide circle, one to two inches large, in the middle. The special throwing arrow, three to five feet long, was like the Crows' in having a forked feathered butt. It differed, however, in possessing a lashed-on barb of chinaberry, a hard wood, at the point. 526

The wheel game called for four players, two to a side. The teams stood facing each other, five or six steps from the starter, who rolled a hoop or wheel down the line between them. The players threw their special arrows simultaneously. If an arrow hit went through the center hole, its barb made it stick and the wheel fell down. Now the side that had hit the mark had the advantage, for the other side had to throw ordinary arrows at the center hole of the fallen wheel from the spot where the successful marksman had stood. Any arrow that failed to hit the center hole was captured and kept by the other side. Any arrow that hit the center hole was recovered by the thrower. Thus the team that first put its barbed arrow in the hole while the hoop was rolling stood a chance to win up to ten arrows while not having to risk a single one of its own. Players without much skill could agree to shoot for the spaces between the spokes instead of the center hole. Spectators bet on one side or the other, and when they got excited put up their own arrows to be thrown.²⁷

The old kicking game played by the boys in the legend of the split of the Comanches and Shoshones, although remembered, seems to have been dropped as a sport. The women, however, were still playing kick-the-ball in 1933. Hopping on the left foot, they keep a rag ball in the air by "dribbling" it off the ground with the instep of the right. The idea is to get as far as possible before the ball is missed and falls to the ground. One or two girls or women play on a side, and good players can carry the ball seventy-five to one hundred yards. A variation is duration kicking in place, and in this a skilled player can keep the ball in the air two or three hundred kicks.

When it was too hot for much exertion, or at night when sports were impossible, or at any time, if a person was too lazy or too old 524 ●

²⁶ Lowie, *The Crow Indians*, fig. 11, p. 102.

²⁷ Informants: Breaks Something; Post Oak Jim.

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- 524 for the more strenuous activities, there were the hand game, varieties of dice, and, in later years, card games.

One of their principal "parlor" games which was common to all the bands was known variously as "bullet," "button," and "hands." The players were divided into two parties who formed in parallel lines opposite each other or in a half-circle. A number of counters, usually sticks, were placed between the two parties and all must be gained by one side or the other before the game was won. The game was usually twenty-one points, though the players might agree upon any number. When all were ready, the players commonly sang one of the many gambling songs and several beat time, either on the ground with a stick, on a *parfleche*, or on small hand drums, or kept time with motions of their arms. During this performance, one player took the bullet, button, bone, or some other convenient object and, after moving his hands in time to the singing and making many gestures to confuse his opponents, thrust out his closed hands. An opposing player guessed which hand the object was in. The game could be varied by passing or pretending to pass the object from one player to another. If the guesser were successful, his party then hid the object. If during the manipulations the object were accidentally dropped, the opposing side took the object and a counter. The game was won when one side had possession of all the counters. This game could last all night or be concluded almost at once. Players bet on the outcome, sometimes staking all they possessed under the care of a neutral scorekeeper.²⁸ Excitement was intense as the "button" passed back and forth to the accompaniment of drumming and rhythmic hand-game songs. The winning of a game called for a special victory song.

Dice games were quite popular until replaced in recent years by card games. There were many variations. One form was played with small, square blocks of wood, each side of which was painted a different color. The bet was made on the color that would turn up when the dice were thrown.

Another form of the game, a favorite with the men, was played on the flesh side of a buffalo robe marked into sections with chalk

²⁸ Stewart Culin, "Games of North American Indians," B. A. E. *Twenty-fourth Annual Report*, 309; Neighbors, "The Naïni or Comanches of Texas," *loc. cit.*, 133; Bancroft, *op. cit.*, 516; Battey, *op. cit.*, 326.

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lines. The dice consisted of two smooth sticks, each about four inches in length, flat on one side and curved on the other. The flat side was about an inch in width. The player held the two sticks between his thumb and forefinger and either tossed them up or dropped them on a flat stone resting in the center of the playing section. The points scored depended on the section in which the sticks fell. One tally stick for each point was taken from the pile by the winner. The player obtaining the most sticks won the game. The women usually varied the game slightly. They used twelve sticks, from six to ten inches in length. Any stick which fell and remained across another counted a point. The first player to get one hundred points won the game.

Another variation of the game, popular with the women, was played with a shallow wicker bowl or basket and six plum stoner or flat pieces of bone.²⁹ The basket was six to eight inches in diameter, and the dice were marked in a way to make possible several combinations of colors. When several players were participating, each player bet with the opposite player. In making the throw, the basket was raised so as to toss the dice only a few inches high. Before they fell, the basket was brought sharply to the ground. Each player threw in turn. The women chatted and joked continually during the game.

The Comanches, like other Indians, had no moral inhibitions against gambling, so they went all out in their betting. After all, it was only an exchange of property between friends, and generous gift-giving was the custom anyhow. Husbands and wives were free to gamble each other's goods, and each was supposed to pay up the other's debts. Some winners, like Breaks Something, were compassionate, however. On one hunting expedition, according to Breaks Something's story, his band came upon another Comanche group and found some men gambling at dice behind a windbreak. One old man had won nearly everything and was looking for new game. Breaks Something cut in to play against him, putting up the cartridges he had brought for hunting: ten cartridges to a tally stick. He bet and won; bet and won. The old man went broke. He bet twelve hides his wife had not yet tanned. Then he bet her tipi and everything in it. Then his two horses. He lost everything he had. In desperation

²⁹ Culin, "Games of North American Indians," *loc. cit.*, 54-55, 159.

824 apparently, no doubt that the Comanche were in frequent contact
411 with tribes using the sinew-lined bow, and that the tribes most
closely related to the Comanche habitually used such bows.

Arrow shafts were made from straight stems of the rough-leaved
dogwood (*Cornus asperifolia*). This species was also the preferred
arrow material of the tribes of the Missouri River region (7, p. 108).
Marcy and McClellan (15, p. 98) describe the arrows of the Comanche
as being "twenty inches long, of flexible wood, with a triangular
point of iron at one end, and two feathers intersecting each other at
right-angles, at the opposite extremity." They do not specify the
material used for arrows further than by saying that it was "flexible
wood." Arrows for the *aratsi* game were made from the stems of
the soapberry (*Sapindus Drummondii*). Wood for game sticks was
obtained from the buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*).

824 The leaves of the smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*) were mixed with
276 tobacco. The addition of other plant materials to tobacco was a
common practice among many tribes of Indians, the leaves of smooth
sumac being widely used in this way. Chamberlain (6, p. 72) notes
that this species was smoked by the Gosiute, and Gilmore (7, p. 100)
cites its use by the Indians of the Upper Missouri, but neither writer
mentions its being mixed with tobacco. McGuire (14, p. 385) gives
Marcy and McClellan (16, p. 102) as his authorities for the follow-
ing: "Captain Marcy refers to the Comanche being extravagantly
fond of smoking tobacco, which they call pah-mo, mixed with the
leaves of sumac (*Rhus trilobata*)." West (24, p. 107) accepts this
without question and repeats it. In neither the 1853 (15) nor the
1854 (16) edition of Marcy and McClellan are we able, however, to
find this complete statement. The passage on Comanche smoking
in these volumes (15 and 16, p. 102) is as follows: "All of them
[the Comanche] are extravagantly fond of tobacco, which they use
for smoking, mixed with the dried leaves of the sumac, inhaling the
smoke into their lungs and giving it out through the nostrils." Evi-
dently the Comanche term for tobacco and the name of the particular
species of sumac were taken by McGuire from some other source and
not from Marcy and McClellan, as is implied. It may be true that
Rhus trilobata was smoked by the Comanche, but *Rhus glabra* was
specified by our informants as the species which was smoked, and
medicinal uses only were ascribed to the former. We know of only
one other reference to *Rhus trilobata* as a smoking material, that by